



Review of Being For by Mark Schroeder

Citation

Richard, M. 2011. "Review of Being For by Mark Schroeder." *Philosophical Review* 120 (2) (January 1): 321–326. doi:10.1215/00318108-2010-031.

Published Version

doi:10.1215/00318108-2010-031

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Mark Schroeder, *Being For*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xvi + 197pp.

Mark Schroeder's *Being For* is about expressivist semantics for natural language.
The sort of expressivism Schroeder is concerned with holds:

(uses of) declarative sentences express mental states;

while some of these states are beliefs, others—in particular, those expressed by
ascriptions of goodness, badness, and obligation --are conative or emotional states
focused on objects and acts;

though these latter states lack propositional content, they stand in inferential
relations with one another and with states of belief;

sentences inherit their inferential relations from the mental states they
(conventionally) express.

Schroeder claims that “no expressivist view...offered in the last twenty years...offers an
actual account of the mental state expressed by any logically complex sentences.” (8-9).
Being For works through the details of what Schroeder takes to be the best account of
such states. He offers the book not as an answer to those who have criticized

expressivism, but as a confirmation of their fears: his conclusion is that “Expressivism....is an extremely unpromising hypothesis about the workings of natural languages.” (179)

According to Schroeder, the primary problem with extant expressivist accounts is their failure to explain what’s expressed by negations of normative sentences. Against Gibbard, who takes as primitive the notion of disagreeing with a belief, decision, or endorsement of a norm¹, Schroeder complains that (a) with this primitive, Gibbard ‘is essentially helping himself to the very thing that...expressivists need to explain’ (52); (b) Gibbard’s notion of disagreement, embedded in the theoretical apparatus of Gibbard 2003, doesn’t explain the difference between thinking two options to both be permissible and equally good (being indifferent) and suspending judgment on whether either of two options is acceptable (being undecided).²

This reviewer was unconvinced that the expressivist needs to give a much more elaborate account of the mental state of disagreement than Gibbard does. Surely we do understand what it is to disagree with someone’s belief (thereby holding that the belief is wrong); surely we understand what it is for someone to disagree with a decision (thereby thinking that the act decided on is not the thing to do). Surely we can make sense of the idea that disagreeing with a belief or decision is being in a state incompatible with the belief or decision. If this much is clear, Gibbard’s primitive is clear enough to bear

¹ See in particular *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 1990) and *Thinking How to Live* (Harvard University Press, 2003). Gibbard’s basic idea is that if a sentence express a belief, approval, or allegiance to a norm, its negation expresses disagreement with the belief, approval, or allegiance. How Gibbard proposes projecting this idea to the negation of molecular sentences is too complicated to take up in a brief review.

² Here Schroeder echoes Jamie Drier; see ‘Negation for Expressivists’ in Ross Schafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Meta-Ethics I* (Oxford University Press, 2006)

explanatory weight. As for the difference between being undecided and indifferent, I couldn't help thinking that Gibbard was as entitled as anyone else to make use of the notion of suspending judgment, and that the ordinary notion of suspending judgment applies just as much to practical decision –to being undecided as to what one may or must do –as to theoretical decision –to being undecided as to what one may or must believe.

Schroeder's own account is worked out clearly and in detail. His leading idea is that *prima facie* it's *easy* to give an expressivist account of a language in which all the atomic sentences –and therefore, all the sentences, period –express a single non-propositional attitude of approval. Let S be a set of sentences with S_i in S expressing approval of act type A_i .³ Suppose we close S under negation, conjunction, and disjunction. Act types are properties, and so they have negations, disjunctions, and conjunctions. Schroeder suggests that the expressivist might say that if sentences A and B express approval, respectively, of P and Q , $\neg A$ expresses approval of P 's negation, $A \vee B$ expresses approval of P and Q 's disjunction, $A \& B$ expresses approval of their conjunction.⁴ One can do the same sort of thing for a language, all of whose atomics express beliefs: If a sentence expresses belief in p , its negation expresses belief in p 's negation; if sentences express beliefs in p and q , their conjunction expresses belief in p

³ Schroeder's running example is a language whose atomics are of the form $FOR(A)$, where A is a 'descriptive gerundive phrase'; the idea is that the sentences express attitudes like approving of giving money to charity. I take it that gerundive phrases pick out act types.

⁴ Schroeder's account actually employs a primitive notion, *being for*, which Schroeder assumes to be some sort of pro-attitude, but does not assume can be identified with whatever attitude our pre-theoretical use of 'approves' picks out. This makes evaluating the semantics the book gives a bit tricky, since it's not altogether clear how sentences like those mentioned in the last note are supposed to be related to sentences we understand. I assume that whatever being for is supposed to be, it is enough like approval that we can understand things of the form $FOR(A)$ as expressing approval (of some sort) of what is associated with A .

and q's conjunction; etc. This general strategy can be used to give an account of a language, some of whose atomics express beliefs and some of whose atomics express approval, **provided** that approval can be analyzed as a kind of belief or belief can be analyzed as a kind of approval. Schroeder suggests that the expressivist should identify believing p with approving of proceeding as if p.

Unfortunately, there are problems with this approach, ones to which *Being For* devotes considerable ingenuity. A rather large problem is that when S is logically complex, it proves impossible to make the sentence S express the belief that S. The problem in its simplest form is this. We are told to identify believing p with *approving of proceeding as if p*. So, using the obvious abbreviation

believing that swimming is healthy = approving of pai swimming is healthy

believing that swimming is not healthy = approving of pai swimming is not healthy

But if we think of 'swimming is healthy' as expressing approval of pai swimming is healthy and apply the principle that if S express approval of F, $\neg S$ expresses approval of F's negation, we must say

'swimming is not healthy' expresses *approving of not pai swimming is healthy*.

Thus ‘swimming is not healthy’ fails to express the (state the analysis identifies with the) belief that swimming is not healthy. The same problem arises with all the rest of the connectives. It has nothing to do with the idea that belief is proceeding as if; the problem arises when believing p is identified with approving of bearing R to p , for any relation R .

This leads Schroeder to complicate his account of belief, identifying believing p with a *pair* of attitudes: approving of p and approving of not p . This actually doesn’t fix the problem –at the end of the day, after expanding his language to a first order one, Schroeder shows that it *still* isn’t the case that in general a sentence S expresses the belief that S . One can show that each sentence S is associated with a mental state closely related to what, on the analysis adopted, is identified with the belief that S , *if* one is willing to make some very strong (and in some cases implausible) assumptions. But the assumptions are in some cases *so* implausible that one can hardly take them seriously.⁵

Call the above *Account A*; Schroeder investigates an alternative to it. On the alternative, one continues to identify believing p with approving of p and approving of not p . But one abandons the goal of showing that each sentence S expresses the belief that S . Instead, one provides an account of “mistake conditions” for the attitudes that Account A assigns to sentences, where an account of mistake conditions for a set of attitudes S is a theory that entails, for each attitude α in S , a biconditional of the form

⁵ For example, one must assume that the claims
For all x , I approve of proceeding as if x is F
I approve of proceeding as if for all x , x is F
are necessarily equivalent.

It's a mistake to have α iff p is false.⁶

It turns out on the account that Schroeder sketches that (for example) if α is the attitude expressed by S , α' that expressed by S' , and

It's a mistake to have α iff p is false

It's a mistake to have α' iff p' is false,

then: it's a mistake to have the attitude expressed by $\neg S$ iff p 's negation is false; it's a mistake to have the attitude expressed by $S \vee S'$ iff the disjunction of p and p' is false; it's a mistake to have the attitude expressed by $S \& S'$ iff the conjunction of p and p' is false.

Suppose now that a sentence's truth conditions are the conditions under which it's not a mistake to have the attitude it expresses. Then this account of the mistake conditions provides the expressivist a way to vindicate the idea that the truth conditions of a (belief expressing) sentence S are determined the attitude S expresses.

To give the account of mistake conditions, however, one must once again make strong and often very implausible assumptions about approval, about the properties of the relation *proceeding as if*, and about the conditions under which it is a mistake to approve of proceeding as if a claim is true. The upshot is that the approach to expressivism *Being For* investigates is unable to make it plausible that the semantic properties of sentences are determined by the attitudes they express. It is primarily for this reason –plus the fact that there is a rather large collection of constructions (e.g., modals and probability

⁶ Obviously we are ignoring issues having to do with context sensitivity.

ascriptions) that the approach apparently can't handle –that Schroeder draws the gloomy conclusion cited at the beginning of this review.

Is the sort of approach *Being For* investigates one that a clear headed expressivist would consider adopting? I have doubts. A minor one is that the analysis of belief is wrong –the person who approves of proceeding as if his partner is faithful need not believe that his partner is faithful. More importantly, it is very unclear that (for example) if 'dancing is good' expresses approval of dancing and 'singing is good' expresses approval of singing, their disjunction expresses approval of the disjunctive property *dancing or singing*. It is hard to know how deep this problem is, since Schroeder does not make clear what approving of an act type or property is.⁷ Certainly someone who thinks that either dancing or singing is good –which Schroeder's account identifies with approving of the disjunctive type *dancing or singing* --need not have a positive attitude towards every instance of dancing or singing. So approving of F can't be identified with anything like being disposed to have a favorable attitude towards (what one takes to be) F's instances. Indeed, to think that singing or dancing is good, one needn't have a positive attitude towards *any* singing or dancing: one might think that one activity is good, one bad, but have no idea which is which.

This leads us to what I take to be the major question about Schroeder's approach. Schroeder assumes that the expressivist must think that if two sentences express approval, so do their negation, conjunction, and disjunction. Though he doesn't say so, one suspects that he thinks this because he thinks that the expressivist is committed to the view that sentences both atomic and complex express "natural" mental states such as

⁷ Neither is there any account of what it is to be for a property.

belief, doubt, approval, disapproval, preference, and the like. If this is right, and if A and B express approval, what other mental state *could* their disjunction express, save approval?

If the last quarter century of meta-ethics has taught us anything, it is that if this is what the expressivist thinks, the expressivist program in meta-ethics is a bust. But why must the expressivist think this? The expressivist's core idea is that certain states of mind—in particular, belief, approval, disagreement with belief or approval, and collections of beliefs, approvals, and disagreements—stand in more or less transparent inferential relations. He thinks this underwrites the idea that there are other states of mind—not themselves to be identified with beliefs, approvals, or disagreements --that reflect these relations. Such states are presumably functional states, ones defined in terms of their relations (in particular, in terms of their inferential relations) to belief, approval, disagreement, and one another. The content of these latter states is unpacked in terms of such relations. A stock example: the expressivist will postulate a state of mind S which (a) one is (typically disposed to be) in if one either disbelieves that it will rain or has decided to take an umbrella; (b) is one such that if one is in it and comes to believe that it will rain, one is typically disposed to decide to take one's umbrella; (c) is consistent with any combination of

(a) either believing or disbelieving that it will rain, and

(b) either deciding for or against taking an umbrella

save believing that it will rain and deciding not to take to take an umbrella.

Such states, the expressivist tells us, are involved in reasoning about what to do and what to think. They are, he tells us, what are expressed by molecular sentences –e.g., S is expressed by ‘if it is going to rain, I shall take an umbrella with me’. It is these sorts of states of mind –and not the simple beliefs, approvals, and so forth expressed by our simplest sentences –that the sophisticated expressivist thinks to be associated with molecular sentences. From this perspective, the idea that there are a few, simple states of mind which are such that every (declarative) sentence of natural language expresses one or another of them is a non-starter. Of course this view of how mental states (and sentences) acquire content is controversial. But it is surely this *sort* of story that the sophisticated expressivist has in mind. To show that expressivism is bankrupt, one has to show that *this* sort of story is untenable. Schroeder’s essay, for all its merits, doesn’t engage here.⁸

Being For is a lively, clearly written essay. It’s required reading for anyone interested in the expressivist program in meta-ethics. It makes a convincing case that a particular way of trying to carry out that program won’t work. What is not clear is why we should infer, from the fact that this particular *huis* is *clos*, that all the rest are as well.⁹

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⁸ I have sketched an account somewhat like the one gestured at in this paragraph in Chapter 3 of *When Truth Gives Out* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹ Thanks to Mark Schroder for comments on an earlier draft.

